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ON PAGE CII

THE WASHINGTON POST
25 June 1982

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Former Agent Claims He Gave CIA Crucial Data

One of America's most notorious fugitives was captured last week—ex-CIA agent Edwin P. Wilson. He was tricked out of his sanctuary in Libya, where he had been providing expertise in the black arts of espionage and terrorism to Col. Muammar Qaddafi.

The government has charged Wilson and his old CIA sidekick, Francis E. Terpil, with illegally shipping U.S. explosives to the Libyan dictator. Federal prosecutors also suspect that Wilson tried to arrange an assassination for Qaddafi.

My associate Dale Van Atta has been investigating Wilson's activities for almost two years. We began communication directly with the fugitive last fall, by telephone and other, more secure means.

Wilson told us that he also had been feeding information to the CIA during his exile, and thought he had "contributed important background information of considerable value." He avoided the question of whether he had been officially working for the intelligence agency—a suspicion that has been the subject of speculation over the years.

One bizarre episode Wilson recounted has been confirmed by other sources. It involved the Justice Department's search for two international fugitives, Jose Dionisio Suarez and Virgilio Paz, wanted for the assassination of Chilean exile leader Orlando Letelier and an American associate in Washington in 1976.

Through an agent code-named Omar, whom he had used when he was working for naval intelligence, Wilson learned the whereabouts of the two fugitives. He passed the information to his U.S. government sources, but the men had skipped by the time federal agents arrived.

Last year, in a secret meeting with a federal prosecutor in Rome, Wilson offered Omar's services again—obviously in a play for leniency in his own case. The offer was rejected.

Even wilder was Wilson's claim that he succeeded in keeping Libya from getting a nuclear bomb. He detailed this escapade in a report he smuggled out to us. Because it was in effect a confession that he had double-crossed his protector, Qaddafi, we agreed not to use the story until Wilson was safe from the mercurial Libyan's wrath.

Here's what Wilson said:

In late 1980, a Belgian named Armand Donnay contacted Wilson in his Tripoli hideout. Donnay demonstrated to Wilson's satisfaction that "he had access to equipment and technical data stolen from the

French to manufacture an atomic bomb."

Wilson said he had the alarming information about Donnay conveyed to the CIA. He told us the agency "indicated no interest in the project."

Wilson said he played along with Donnay for several months, stalling for time. But he was unable to prevent the Belgian from making "certain technical information" available to the Libyans. In fact, Wilson said he sat in on three meetings Donnay had with the Libyan Atomic Energy Commission. The Libyans, he said, "indicated they wished to buy the equipment."

When the CIA continued to show no interest in the situation, Wilson decided to do the job singlehandedly. He managed to persuade Donnay that the Libyans actually had no interest in his stolen nuclear material. Wilson said he did this "rather than allow the Libyans to purchase the equipment." He added that the stuff was subsequently sold to either Syria or Saudi Arabia.

The picture of a renegade American agent patriotically keeping Libya from getting the bomb at risk of his own life is, of course, suspicious. Yet the substance of Wilson's strange story was considered important enough to be worth the time of Vice President Bush's chief of staff, Adm. Dan Murphy. Several months ago, he granted an appointment to a Wilson contact who delivered a briefing on the matter.